

Rackstraw Downes

Betty Cuninghame Gallery January 24 – March 1, 2008

Rackstraw Downes' paintings reveal the material function of the American landscape. He works onsite, with attention to the slow, unfolding process of seeing and a meticulous, almost microcosmic depiction of detail. Many of his previous vistas—cement factories, ventilation towers, garbage dumps, oil fields, refineries, culverts, ditches and sewer mains—have focused on the interstices of industry, contraposing the natural and man-made. Yet, if asked about an agenda, Downes would likely respond with an explanation of his interest in the formal problems of representing what and how one sees, hesitant to broach social or political concerns.

Downes also portrays the streets of Greater New York—in recent years, challenging his stamina and patience on the depiction of elevated structures such as overpasses and subway train trestles. The formal concerns raised by these subjects are manifested in such attributes as the paintings' extreme horizontal formats and the curving horizons representing the empirical experience of viewing a panorama firsthand rather than in the studio from photography.

In this exhibition of paintings from 2004 to 2008, while his interwoven formal and conceptual concerns run throughout, the work is divided between the diametrically opposed physical locations of the city and the desert, representing the two extremes of Downes's thinking. While the cityscapes predominantly depict New York sites from under or around bridges—an "agenda" Downes describes as "putting the weight on top" in a landscape rather than the reverse—the deserts are more enigmatic and less immediate, requiring a careful excavation of details and a deciphering of man-made objects, whose presence is all but swallowed by the desert expanses.

The details in these deserts, such as the tumbleweeds and tire tracks in *Presidio Horse Racing Association*

Track, 2. Looking West, North and Northeast: The South and North Horse Shelters (2006), evoke a narrative terminated by the white racing track fence running across the horizon. The tracks serve both as a signifier of human activity and a formal device—their sweeping curves and diagonals are gestural and lively, moving the eye around the foreground and into the painting's deeper space.

Tire tracks in the foreground of *Presidio Horse Racing Association Track, 2. Looking South and West: The North Horse Shelter with the End of the Track* (2006), however, resemble curved rows of crops that call to mind America's rapid decline of agricultural employment since the Industrial Revolution. Such socioeconomic readings of Downes's work do not contradict his reasons for choosing a particular site, "It's different every time, but I think often there's some appetite or agenda you're unaware of simmering in your head, and your choice is a response to that." However, the strength of the illusion created through Downes's empirical observation invariably evokes issues beyond the optical—it's simply up to the viewer to decide which of the artist's choices are triggered by social, political or cultural concerns.

The beehive yard paintings behind the gallery's desk demonstrate a strange dislocation of nature and artifice in the landscape, juxtaposing a sweeping grid of cubed forms (perhaps a silent nod to Downes' early years as a geometric abstract painter, inspired by mentors like Al Held) with the amorphous free-flowing shapes of tumbleweed. The lengthy shadows intensify the silent drama, as if the scene were a setting for a science fiction film. The beehive boxes, an unusual sight against the desert's mountainous backdrop, recall recent scares that the disappearance of pollinating bees might be linked to cell phone radiation. Scientists have suggested that



Rackstraw Downes, "Beehive Yard at the Rim of a Canyon on the Rio Grande, Presidio, TX," (2005). Oil on canvas, 6 3/8 by 34 3/4 in.

technology is again responsible for the disruption of our ecosystem—and ultimately the destruction of our environment—warning that massive food shortages could result from an absence of bee pollination.

How would Downes respond to this interpretation? When asked about the role of globalization in his work, he replied, "In my paintings, I think I have been more interested in the contrast between engineered and natural forms...and I was interested in beehives and now the issue of beehives are a serious issue. I am interested in man's impact on nature." For all of his formal priorities, here is an alarming synchronicity with current events in Downes's choice of sites—he was, after all, painting New York's garbage dumps around the same time waste management became an issue.

Rackstraw Downes's paintings evoke the fantastic and bizarre through a heightened depiction of mundane, everyday and overlooked places. His work exposes our disconnection from the natural world—we no longer understand the processes involved in the functioning of an industrialized society. Yet our growing awareness of environmental crises demands that we pay close attention to the journey a natural resource makes from its source to our homes. Downes's exploration of interstitial sites, their histories and their connections to larger contemporary phenomena make him a bit of a sociological archaeologist. With the confluence of aesthetic vision and conceptual complexity, his paintings command and require both visual and intellectual engagement. Through direct observation in the 21st-century landscape, his vigorous dialogue with the art of painting proves it still a magical and illuminating enterprise.

—Greg Lindquist